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FOR A/S SHANNON OAS AMB. MAISTO FROM AMBASSADOR

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ELAB](#) [KDEM](#) [SCUL](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: TO BE OR NOT TO BE: INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS IN
VENEZUELA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Classified By: W.R. Brownfield for Reason 1.4(b).

Summary

¶1. (C) We have carefully considered whether or not it makes sense for the USG to advocate (and possibly substantially fund) an international election observation mission (EOM) for the December presidential elections. While an EOM would likely act as a brake on Bolivarian electoral excesses, we can also envision the possibility that observers would merely bless a seriously flawed process. If the Department decides to fund and/or push an EOM, it must be led by a hemispheric heavy-hitter (we offer suggestions), arrive with significant anticipation so as to evaluate more than just election day mechanics, and be affiliated with a credible organization like the OAS or the EU. We are neutral on whether to support an EOM, but the go/no-go decision must be made now to make this worth the effort. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Though the presidential election is not until December 3, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) is in full campaign mode, and the broad outlines of the campaign are simple to see:

a) spend money. A LOT of money. In fact, Chavez and company have already maxed out the cash distribution potential of the traditional missions and are devising new mechanisms to put money on the streets;

b) hide the ball on the electoral registry. The National Electoral Council (CNE) continues to deny access to the opposition to the registry, which is being continuously padded with questionable new voters, half of whom have no addresses to match with the names;

c) abuse government resources and privileges, including real property (e.g., using BRV vehicles, including ambulances, to transport folks to rallies); continue blatant abuses of "cadenas nacionales" to advance Bolivarian campaign themes;

d) stage attacks on the opposition, ranging from the criminalization of dissent (vs. Sumate and ten journalists at current count) to levying wild public charges and threats (vs. Zulia Governor Rosales and Baruta Mayor Capriles) to sending armed thugs to physically threaten opposition politicians (vs. Chacao Mayor Lopez) and

e) blame us for everything. This campaign is "Chavez vs. the Empire."

Pros and Cons of an EOM for Venezuela

¶3. (C) While we believed -- and still do -- that the OAS electoral observation mission in December left a lot to be desired, it was a net plus. First, it did do something, even if it wasn't enough, and second, the fact that it even mildly criticized the election process really annoyed the Bolivarians. The mere presence of an EOM did represent some sort of brake on Bolivarian behavior and caused them to make some electoral concessions. An EOM might help cement this concession in place for future elections. Finally, the pace of Bolivarian abuses seems to be accelerating, and the scope broadening. The buzz in Caracas (and that does not make it true) is that the BRV is nervous about the election because of the huge abstentionism in the December 2005 legislative elections, including the failure to motivate the Chavista base, and by the weakness of the Chavez record over the last seven years. Chavez probably fears that an unopposed run will make the election will look like a plebiscite reminiscent of dictatorships. There is a possibility that, faced with poor turnout, Chavez might resort to fraud and blatant intimidation to pad the numbers (note, not to win the election) to reach his goal of 10 million votes. A credible EOM would be a deterrent to fraud or, better yet, could discover such irregularities. We note that there will be new leadership at the CNE, undoubtedly strongly pro-Chavez, that might make some of the sophomoric and exploitable mistakes that an EOM could catch.

¶4. (C) On the downside, it is inevitable an EOM will be hamstrung from the start, laden by the government with conditions and access issues that will prevent it from seeing behind the curtain at the CNE and delay its arrival. We can be certain that the Bolivarians will intentionally bog down negotiations with the opposition candidate(s) so that conditions will be in flux up until the elections. Previous

EOMs have simply not been technically sophisticated enough or had enough time in country to grasp the context of these negotiations or the fundamental inequities in Venezuela's electoral system. Also, since Chavez appears to be on a winning trajectory absent some devastating political or social crisis, it is almost certain the EOM will merely anoint a Chavez victory. Even if we can count on some modest criticism that the EOMs have delivered in the past, Chavez has spun it to his advantage and has come away rather clean. Best of all, we will have six years to be reminded that his victory was blessed by the international community. And finally, we assume that Chavez learned from his mistakes in responding to the EOM reports last year, and will not repeat them.

What a Good EOM Needs

¶5. (C) Embassy is neutral on whether we should support another EOM. But if Washington decides to support (and fund if practical), we suggest that it:

-- Start early, sooner the better. Electoral norms are already being violated (Chavez is openly campaigning despite rules limiting the season). The inflated registry, which Chavez cites as the reason he beat the referendum, is in disastrous condition and in need of real scrutiny.

-- Be durable and consistent over time, no electoral tourism. We saw what happened with OAS IOM Chief Perina and his crew; it took them a few weeks to get oriented, and by the time they knew what was going on, the election was upon them. As the Bolivarians are already at work, so, too, do the observers need to be watching.

-- Establish at least one branch office (Maracaibo). Zulia is most likely to resist the charms of electoral Bolivarianism, and the Bolivarians know it. They're already pressing Rosales hard. Observers on site might keep the BRV honest.

-- Be affiliated with the OAS, or the EU, or both. Obviously, the EU got a taste (somewhat bitter) of Venezuela's problems during the December 2005 parliamentary elections. The EU probably has more credibility with the opposition than the OAS, which has more experience here. Separate but coordinated missions would be best.

-- Be headed by a person of real stature, who is willing to devote the time and energy to the enterprise and who will not be intimidated by Chavez and the Bolivarians.

16. (C) The Department will have to weigh a number of factors regarding who might head an EOM. We include a few thoughts, based on our experience here. Perina is a swell fellow, but he was brutalized by the Bolivarians, and the talk in Caracas is that he got rolled by them. He backed down on the day he was to make his interim report public. Based on this experience, and the general pugnacity and lack of scruples demonstrated by the BRV, our view is that the best course would be to select a former head of government to lead an EOM. Former (or soon to be so) presidents Lagos, Toledo, and Flores (ES) have all had their public and private scraps with Chavez, have real status, and could be counted upon to be tough in the clinches. Batlle of Uruguay could be considered, as could Cardoso of Brazil and Tuto Quiroga of Bolivia. Further afield, Zedillo would have the stature and the principles, but is otherwise occupied. A dream team of Aznar and Felipe Gonzalez would be interesting, with two ideologically diverse former leaders who both have made clear their views on the undemocratic behaviors of the Bolivarian government.

17. (C) AMBASSADOR'S COMMENT: I don't really care what we decide on an EOM, but we should decide it now.
BROWNFIELD